

A BRITISH PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

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This article was prompted by an encounter that we had some while ago with an American tourist in London. He asked us if we would direct him to "Lee-Cester" Square. Drawing on our encyclopedic knowledge of the geography of London, we were able to inform the gentleman concerned that there was no such place. We then went on to suggest that what he really wanted was Leicester Square, where the first word is pronounced lester and not, as the gentleman had supposed, lee-cester. Accordingly, we directed one rather bemused tourist to Leicester Square after we had explained to him that British place-names are not always pronounced as they are spelt.

This encounter set us thinking (something of an accomplishment). Rather than having tourists come to Britain and getting confused and/or lost because of our out-of-the-way pronunciations for some place-names, we decided to draw up a short list of those British place-names which are liable to be confusing to the tourist (as well as 90% of the natives!). This list, presented below, we feel sure will soon find its way into countless tourist guides of Britain.

We begin by pointing out two other well-known examples where the pronunciation doesn't tally with the spelling which can also be found in London. There is the River THAMES, which is pronounced temz and not thames, and there is GREENWICH, a district to the south of London, which we enunciate as greenn-ij and not as green-witch.

Moving out of London, we find ABERGAVENNY in the county of Monmouthshire. The pronunciation that meets with most favor from the inhabitants of this fair town is aber-genny. In the neighboring county of Herefordshire there's a town called LEOMINSTER. If you ever have to ask directions to get to this place, just ask for lem-ster. Adjacent to Herefordshire is the county of GLOUCESTER-SHIRE (pronounced gloster-sheer). In this county we find two more quirky place-names. One, a town, is CIRENCESTER, which is often pronounced sis-e-ter. And the other, a tiny village, is CHURCHTOWN. The pronunciation for this is chow-zen.

Domino-like, we advance to the adjacent county of Warwickshire. In this county is the major city of BIRMINGHAM (pronounced birming-em, unlike the usual pronunciation of Alabama's Birmingham). Just a few miles to the south of Birmingham can be found the town of ALCESTER. The okay pronunciation here is awl-ster.

Moving right along now ... noted for its horse-racing is the Staffordshire town of UTTOXETER. Among several pronunciations for this fine town is uck-ster.

If you should ever pay a visit to the university town of Oxford, in Oxfordshire, the chances are that you might want to visit BICESTER, a town just to the north-east of Oxford. The correct pronunciation of this place-name, as, no doubt, the academics of Oxford will tell you, is bister.

Let's pay a visit to Huntingdonshire now. The county possesses a town called GODMANCHESTER. The folks up in Huntingdonshire feel that they always have to go one better than anyone else. Accordingly, they have endowed the town with two strange pronunciations: gum-sister and gon-shister.

The county of Norfolk, which looks out onto the oilfields of the North Sea, calls attention to itself because of its town called WYMONDHAM. The pronunciation here is win-dum.

Up in the north of England is the county of Yorkshire, the largest county of Great Britain, but less than one-third the size of San Bernardino County, California. Yorkshire boasts of a hamlet called JERVAULX, which is pronounced jar-vis, and of a village called AMOTHERBY, which is pronounced amer-by, and of a town called PONTEFRACHT, which is pronounced pom-fret. We bet that San Bernardino County can't beat these three. Or can it?

Down in Kent, the county facing out across the English Channel toward France and most of the rest of Europe, we find the places MEOPHAM, said as mep-am, and LYMPNE, said as lim.

In the southernmost county of England, Cornwall, tucked away in a quiet corner of the county, away from the hustle and bustle of the urbs, is a little place called MOUSEHOLE. The correct pronunciation of this rhymes with "bamboozle" and is moo-zel. Going from one extreme to the other (from the southernmost county of England to the northernmost) we find the county of Northumberland. Northumberland claims its place in this article on the strength of its village called ULGHAM, said as uff-am,

and its town called ALNWICK, said as an-ik.

We have already mentioned the county of Yorkshire. Next door to this is Lancashire. The county of Lancashire is the proud possessor of a town called ULVERSTON. This looks as if it ought nearly to rhyme with Galveston, but since its pronunciation is oo-ston it more nearly rhymes with another Texas city, Houston.

To prove to the reader that the Scots are just as adept as the English at conjuring up weird pronunciations for some of their place-names, we shall instance a few examples from Scotland. One of the southernmost counties in Scotland is KIRKCUDBRIGHT. So as not to incur the wrath of the Scots, all Sassenachs must carefully enounce this as ker-koo-bree. Oddly enough, the major town in this county has the same name and pronunciation. Another case of town and county in Scotland having the same name is that of BANFF. Somehow, the N in this name is transformed into an M for the purpose of pronunciation -- thus, bamf.

In the county of Perthshire, right in the heart of Scotland, is a village where the famous Scottish outlaw Rob Roy is reputedly buried. The village is BALQUHIDDER and the pronunciation is bal-widder. Somewhat south of Perthshire is the county called Lanarkshire. In this county there is a place which goes by the name of DALZIEL, pronounced dee-ell.

Still in Scotland, in the county of West Lothian (formerly called Linlithgowshire) there is a seaport which has the rather innocent-looking name BORROWSTOUNNESS. One pronunciation for this 15-letter name is the two-syllabled bo-nes. The fact that this pronunciation is given in the gazetteer of Webster's Second Edition leads us to speculate that this is one of the longest, if not the longest, unhyphenated unpluralized words or names of two syllables ever to occur in any Webster dictionary. We just have to give full marks to the Scots for such a remarkably short pronunciation for a 15-letter name.

So far in this article, we have chosen not to mention any Welsh place-names. We have good reason for this. The Welsh, being the most perverse of all Britons, set out in the first place to make all their hamlet, village, town, city, river and mountain names quite unpronounceable anyway. We see no reason why we or the tourist should even attempt to wrestle with monstrosities like BWLCH-Y-RHIW, CWMRHYDYCEIRW, GWMLLWM, RHUDD-DDIN and YNYSMUDW. So we offer this piece of advice to anyone thinking of visiting Wales: forget it! On the other hand, we are not aware of any particularly outstanding examples of place-names in Northern Ireland where spelling and pronunciation differ greatly.